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ABSTRACT

The media production department of Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC) began quality circle meetings in January 1981 after studying the process of quality circles and obtaining the understanding and support of the college administration. A quality circle is a small group of people doing similar work who voluntarily meet on a regular basis to set goals, identify and analyze problems, find solutions, and cooperate with management to implement those solutions. Projects undertaken at CPCC have focused on improving services to students. CPCC has found that implementation problems in educational institutions are not vastly different from those in industry. However, there have been several specific problem areas in the CPCC quality circle experience: (1) skepticism about quality circle applicability; (2) existing meetings; (3) highly educated members; (4) end-of-term slowdown; (5) lack of budget flexibility; (6) definition of productivity in education and the control of the variables; and (7) a feeling of hopelessness to effect change. Though not a panacea, the quality circle process can be a positive, rewarding component of sound educational management. (EM)

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QUALITY CIRCLES: INVOLVEMENT, PROBLEM-SOLVING AND RECOGNITION

by H. Lynn Moretz

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QUALITY CIRCLES: INVOLVEMENT, PROBLEM-SOLVING, AND RECOGNITION

Editor's Note: Read from the perspective of an innovation for improving instruction--with students forming quality circles and making presentations to faculty--this concept would appear to have even greater potential.

Quality Circles

The Japanese have astonished the world. In just over twenty years, they have erased their reputation as "junk merchant" and now lead the world in quality and productivity. A major factor in that remarkable success is the committed, systematic involvement of Japanese employees in quality and productivity improvement. This involvement takes place through small groups often called "Quality Circles."

The quality circle concept originated in Japan in 1961 as an outgrowth of American assistance after World War II. Quite simply, *a quality circle is a small group of employees doing similar work who voluntarily meet on a regular basis to set goals, identify and analyze problems, find solutions, and cooperate with management to implement those solutions or improvements.*

Quality Circles at Central Piedmont Community College

Early in 1980, a study of the quality circle process was begun at Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC). By December, the understanding and support of the college administration had been obtained and a pilot circle planned in the Media Production Department. This circle, believed to be the first in an American educational institution, began meeting in January, 1981.

What do quality circles actually do? First, they learn the "people building" philosophy of quality circle management. This includes recognizing the expertise and contribution of every employee; fostering mutual respect and trust; avoiding gossip and "fingerpointing"; focusing on issues, not personalities; helping members learn and grow; and maintaining members' self-esteem and group identity.

Within this philosophical framework, circle members learn and apply various problem-solving tools, including:

(a) Brainstorming
(b) Prioritizing techniques
(c) Cause and effect analysis
(d) Data collection techniques
(e) Statistical quality control techniques
(f) Pareto analysis (concept of "vital few, trivial many")
(g) Force field analysis
(h) Group dynamics
(i) Presentation techniques

Applying those tools systematically, circles generally follow these steps in completing improvement projects:

Step	Task	Step	Task
1.	Problem Identification	5.	Data Analysis
2.	Problem (Project) Selection	6.	Solution/Improvement Finding
3.	Cause and Effect Analysis	7.	Circle Presentation to Management
4.	Data Collection	8.	Implementation

A "facilitator" plays a key role in implementing quality circles. The facilitator, well versed in group dynamics and quality circle techniques, trains circle leaders and assists leaders with member training. Typically, the circle leader is the workgroup supervisor. The facilitator is not a member of the workgroup, but normally meets with the circle during its first project cycle. Because participation is voluntary, a sense of ownership and commitment to improve is developed.

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Examples of Circle Projects

Projects undertaken to date have focused almost exclusively on improving services to students. Circles have reorganized learning labs, revised lab course content, created their own staff development plan for computer literacy, developed and implemented new financial aid policies to encourage student retention, developed and implemented new promotion ideas, and improved registration processes for foreign students.

Implementation Problems in Education

Basically, our experience suggests that implementation problems in educational institutions are not vastly different from those in industry. Developing and maintaining management understanding, support and "ownership"; leader and member training; and effective facilitation are key problem areas in education as in industry. Several specific problem areas in our experience are worth mentioning, however:

1. Skepticism about QC applicability. Because of its industrial origins, in the early stages of our program, many questioned the applicability of the process. Indeed, a major foundation of QC's in industry was the assumption of guaranteed employment for workers--an assumption that does not hold here.
2. Existing meetings. Most of our workgroup circles had an established pattern of meetings. In two instances the supervisors unilaterally decided to merge the regular meeting with the circle meeting. This caused some workgroup members to feel "subtle pressure" although they had already agreed to join the circle.
3. Highly educated members. Most professional circle members have advanced degrees. This speeds training in techniques, but it sometimes leads to philosophizing and semantic hair-splitting.
4. End-of-term-slowdown. Instructor circles have a tendency to skip meetings during the end of term grade rush and during class breaks. In some cases, little harm has resulted, in others there has been significant loss of momentum.
5. Lack of budget flexibility. State budget regulations severely limit a workgroup's ability to redirect its funds. This thwarts cost-cutting motivation because money saved in one line item can be used in other ways only with time-consuming difficulty, if at all.
6. Defining "productivity" in education and controlling the variables. In operating areas this is no greater a problem in education than, say, in insurance. In instructional areas it is more difficult to achieve consensus on definitions, to control variables, and to collect valid data on which to build improvement. Much improvement is possible, however, if instructor circles will systematically focus on such areas as attrition and achievement.
7. Hopelessness. Unfortunately, a substantial number of teachers and other professional educators have lost confidence in their ability to effect change. Budget cuts, salary freezes, abuse by students and lack of parental support have sharply reduced morale, especially in public schools. Many of the best are leaving (often to become quality circle facilitators in industry).

Though not a panacea, the quality circle process can be a positive, rewarding component of sound educational management. It is a vehicle for creative problem-solving through systematic employee involvement. It fosters improved communications between management. It also provides positive recognition for the efforts of employees at all levels to make improvements in the work they do and the systems they manage.

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